

READING STRATEGIES FOR CRITICAL READING

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Abstract

This paper discusses and shares some strategies of teaching critical reading which are hopefully useful for teachers of English in having their students actively involved in reading activity in their classrooms. In high schools, SMPs or SMAs, teachers typically teach their students to read receptively, to read for information. What's more, many freshman students have not been taught to read actively or critically to construct knowledge as they read. Students gain knowledge by memorizing the statements within a text. For them, as non-critical readers, texts provide facts. For critical readers, any text depicts the facts. They also recognize not only what a text says, but also how that text portrays the issue described in it. A text is written in various ways as a typical creation of a unique author. For example, a non-critical reader might read a history book to learn the facts of the situation or to discover an accepted interpretation of those events. Whereas a critical reader might read the same work to appreciate how a particular perspective on the events and a particular selection of facts can lead to particular understanding. The reading strategies for critical reading aim to allow students recognize an author's purpose, understand tone and persuasive elements, and recognize bias. These goals actually refers to something on the page. Each requires inferences from evidence within the text. Critical reading is not simply close and careful reading. To read critically, one must actively recognize and analyze evidence upon the page.

Key words: critical readers, non-critical readers, active reading, reading strategies

Introduction

This paper discusses the reading strategies in teaching critical reading. The strategies aim to get students to read to accomplish certain goals of recognizing an author's purpose, understanding tone and persuasive elements, and recognizing bias. Each of the goals requires inferences from evidence within the text. Readers have to know that the goals actually refer to something on the page. Recognizing purpose involves inferring a basis for choices of content and language, recognizing tone and persuasive elements involves classifying the nature of language choices, and recognizing bias involves classifying the nature of patterns of choice of content and language. In other words, critical reading is not simply close and careful reading. To read critically, one must actively recognize and analyze evidence upon the text.

For SMP or SMA teachers of English, critical reading tasks, to some extent, are somewhat relevant to the scientific approach used in the Curriculum 2013 involving students' activities in observing, questioning, collecting information, associating, and communicating.

Skillful in reading a text critically is important in making its reader's thinking to find out whether a text refers to a fact or opinion. This is due to the fact that a writer must have some reasons why s/he writes it and focuses on the reasons to support them. As a reader, one will have to evaluate the arguments given in the text, interpreting whether they are positive or negative claims. One needs some skill to read critically in order to be able to interpret the idea conveyed by a text. One may read a text to gain knowledge by memorizing the sentences in it. It is usually done by non-critical readers. They just learn the facts of the situation because for them texts provide facts. They will accept the meaning of the facts and they feel satisfied with recognizing what a text says. Put it another way, non-critical readers talk about or restate the same topic as the original text. In contrast, for critical readers, any single text provides but one portrayal of the facts, one individual's "take" on the subject matter. Critical readers thus recognize not only what a text says, but also how that text portrays the subject matter. They recognize the various ways in which each and every text is the unique creation of a unique author. In addition, critical readers might read the same work to appreciate how a particular perspective on the events and a particular selection of facts can lead to particular understanding.

In general, textbooks on critical reading commonly ask their readers to accomplish certain goals such as recognizing an author's purpose, to understand tone and persuasive elements, and to recognize bias. Notice that none of these goals actually refers to something on the page. Each requires inferences from evidence within the text in a way that recognizing purpose involves inferring a basis for choices of content and language, recognizing tone and persuasive elements involves classifying the nature of language choices, and recognizing bias involves classifying the nature of patterns of choice of content and language. Below is the sample taken from Mikulecky & Jeffries' *Advanced Reading Power* given to the students of Semester IV of the English Study Program as their semester examination of Reading 3 Course.

"Unlike parts of Indonesia closer to the Asia mainland, Flores has been an island for at least a million years. As is the case with islands elsewhere, its fauna evolved in its own way, producing creatures larger or smaller than their mainland relatives: a [...] lost world of tiny elephants, giant rats, Komodo dragons and even larger extinct lizards.

This isolation had its effects on the human inhabitants. One of the most surprising things about the Liang Bua skeleton is its size: in life, no more than a meter (about 3 ft) tall, about the same size as one of the giant rats. Living in a hole in the ground and chased by lizards of giant proportions, the creature has been nicknamed "hobbit" by some researchers—a reference to the small, hole-dwelling heroes of *The Lord of Rings*.

For Brown, it was the smallness of the skull which showed that *homo floresiensis* was truly different. When he measured the skull volume and found it a chimp-sized 380 cc, he says his jaw "dropped to my knees. Small stature is easy to explain but small brain capacity is a bigger problem—it still is." Yet these tiny brained creatures were skilled enough to make finely crafted stone tools.

1. From the facts here, what can you infer about the process of evolution on islands?
2. "This isolation had its effects on the human inhabitants." Is this a fact or an inference? Explain.
3. What do scientists usually infer about small brain size?
4. Why was Brown so surprised about the small brain size?"

(Mikulecky & Jeffries, 2007:93-94)

The following are some sample answers of the Semester IV students of the English Study Program to some of the above questions. These are the semester examination questions:

Question 5. *From the facts here, what can you infer about the process of evolution on islands?*

Student 1: *In my opinion, the process of evolution on the islands were totally too long. I found that Brown thought about homo floresiensis' skull was small and truly different. So this process of evolution caused the lost world of extinct animals.*

Student 2: *The process depends on each island. It seems like waber and wallace the fauna and flora are different. Actually the farmer from Papua has that waber, has different size from its mainland Australia's kangaroo.*

Student 3: *The statement is an inference because it is the scientists' opinion and there is no real proof about that statement.*

The varied answers given by the students show that they tried to relate what they already know to the knowledge about the evolution that they might have gotten from another discipline or other disciplines. They might have watched the movies "The Lord of the Ring" and been familiar with the word 'hobbit' as used in the movies. In addition, the students' answers indicate that they show different levels of thinking. In other words, it shows how critically they were reading and putting information together.

Silberstein et. al. (2005) states that when one reads critically, s/he draws conclusions and makes judgments about the text s/he reads. However, comprehending is more than just recognizing and understanding words. Therefore, true comprehension means making sense of what is read and connecting the ideas in the text to what is already known. Meanwhile, Zabihi (2011) points out that it is important to find out whether a text helps promote critical reading since as a technique it is used to discover and evaluate information within a text. Consequently, texts to be read critically by students have to be selected by considering the strategies of how to deal with such texts in order to work up students' skill in reading critically.

Reading Strategies

Critical reading assumes that each author offers a depiction of a topic. An author, therefore, presents his/her ideas by making choices of content, language, and structure in order to frame a presentation. On the other hand, readers examine each of these choices, and consider their effect on the meaning.

However, it is always a problem for teachers of English when they teach reading to their students. They frequently do not read the assigned material. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers emphasize the importance of reading and learning to read effectively to their students. There are at least three general problems (York University, accessed from <http://www.yorku.ca>), namely students do not allocate the time necessary to do their reading, students may not understand the difference between reading and preparing, and so do not get as much out of the articles as they might, and are not then ready to engage in class discussion, and students do not know how to deal with difficult material and it often stops them from continuing reading.

There are actually many strategies of teaching critical reading such as asking questions about the purpose and background, the author and the text, evidence used in the text, and assumptions made. Below are some strategies for teaching critical reading.

The following questions may be usefully asked about any text you are reading:

1. *Purpose and background*

- Why is your purpose of reading this text?
- What type of text is it; research report, essay, textbook, book review?
- What do you know about the subject of the text?

2. *The author and the text*

- Who is the author? What do you know about the author?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What is the author's purpose? Why has the text been written?
- What is the date of publication? Is it appropriate to the argument?
- What is the writer's attitude towards the topic?
- What conclusions are drawn?

3. *Evidence used*

- Is there a clear distinction between fact and opinion?
- Is evidence used to support arguments? How good is the evidence? Are all the points supported?
- In an experimental study, was the sample size adequate and are the statistics reliable?
- Are there any unsupported points? Are they well-known facts or generally accepted opinions?
- Are the writer's conclusions reasonable in the light of the evidence presented?

4. *Assumptions made*

- What assumptions has the writer made? Are they valid?
- What beliefs or values does the writer hold? Are they explicit?
- Look at the language that is used, e.g. active/passive verbs, nominalisations, pronouns, ergative verbs, articles, etc. Is it always possible to identify participants and processes? e.g. compare: the government increased taxes; they increased the taxes; taxes were increased; taxes increased; the taxes increased, there was an increase in taxes
- Look for emphatic words such as it is obvious, definitely and of course.
- Look for hedges: possible, might, perhaps.
- Look for emotional arguments, use of maximisers: completely, absolutely, entirely, or minimisers: only, just, hardly, simply, merely.
- How else could the text have been written?

Another way of critical reading strategies is using the 7 critical reading strategies (Adapted from a text written by Salisbury University).

1. **Previewing:** This is a strategy to find out what a text is all and how it is organized before reading it closely by skimming to get an overview of the content and organization, and identifying the rhetorical situation.
2. **Contextualizing:** Use one's own experience to understand the words and their meaning.
3. **Questioning to understand and remember:** Asking questions about the content.
4. **Reflecting on challenges to your beliefs and values or examining your personal responses.**
5. **Outlining and summarizing :** Identifying the main ideas and restating them in your own words.
6. **Evaluating an argument:** Testing the logic of a text as well as its credibility and emotional impact.
7. **Comparing and contrasting related readings:** Exploring likenesses and differences between to understand them better.

Lewin (2010) suggests some questioning strategies to practice students to read critically by sparking starter questions. Adapted this strategy, in one session of teaching reading to university students, I gave the following expressions for them to read and respond critically (the sentences were quoted from several sources):

1. *Karena mengantuk, truk bermuatan batubara menabrak sebuah rumah hingga roboh.*
2. *Dicari perjahit wanita*
3. *Menerima kontrakan khusus wanita*

In general, they understand the meaning of the three, probably because they were given in Bahasa Indonesia, and they responded as I expected. But to their surprise, I questioned them these "How come a sleepy truck hit a house?", "Looking for what? A tailor/seamstress or someone who sews/stitches a woman?", and "Let a house/room for a woman or one who is looking for a woman to be contracted?"

Last but not least, a reading activity in a classroom is conducted by giving a chance to students to read for comprehension, not to make them listen to lecturing on assigned reading and take notes.

Conclusion

To conclude, reading critically essentially directly extending the strategies for reading theoretically but doing so explicitly within the disciplinary context of the course. While rhetorical strategy primarily emphasize more generic responses such as author's intent reading critically is fundamentally discipline based. Teaching critical reading necessitates teaching student. Hypotheses and assumption use the discipline and showing them how to apply these directly to their reading. Reading critically means developing a range of questions appropriate of the discipline which the reader asks of the texts. It uses full construct, with students, such a series of questions that might be use evaluating a text within your discipline and applying those questions to certain texts.

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